

Barbara J. McClure, *Emotions: Problems and Promise for Human Flourishing*. Waco, TX (Baylor University Press), 2019, xvi + 349pp. HB ISBN 978-1-60258-329-0, \$59.95.

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Conventional models of theological reflection in pastoral and practical theology normally begin with a process of listening to non-theological diagnoses of the matter in hand. One thinks of the many versions of the Pastoral Cycle, whose roots can be found in Segundo's liberation theology and Kolb's cycle of learning, or the injunction to 'see-judge-act' in traditions of action-reflection such as the Young Christian Workers, in which immersion in the complexities of lived experience and social context underpins an entire process of careful attention to the world.

Yet few of these can have been as sustained, detailed and comprehensive as Barbara McClure's engagement with human emotion. She argues that this is a necessary undertaking for all pastoral theologians and practitioners, since so much of their work involves understanding the role of emotions in people's lives. Indeed, she says, emotions are a central to what makes us human. It follows then, that an investigation into cultural understandings of emotions and their significance is an essential prolegomenon to any program of pastoral care-giving.

McClure's initial objective of surveying and summarising the scholarship soon revealed to her the scale of the task and the difficulties of rendering such a study coherent without oversimplification. Emotions have featured highly in the cultural imagination from antiquity to the present day, yet the sheer range and diversity militate against any kind of reductionism. She also discovered the extent to which different disciplines across the fields of psychology, religion, medicine, and the natural and social sciences occupied parallel but separate

universes. This book therefore reflects her efforts not only to navigate her way between these various disciplinary silos – something she does with circumspection and rigour – but also to draw out common threads in search of some kind of over-arching narrative.

In fact, as McClure is at pains to emphasise, the plurality of understandings reflects the fact that the aetiology, functions and effects of emotion – and its various alternative terms, such as desire, feeling, passion, or affect – is subject to a plethora of *interpretations* as to the part played by emotion in human experience and culture. McClure suggests that what unites all these perspectives is the way in which they set the measure of emotion against a set of value-judgements on the basis of emotions' contribution to human survival and well-being. From here, she concludes that the most compelling narrative connects emotion to human virtue and notions of the good. These values may, in themselves, be culturally and historically variable, but which nevertheless lend a coherence and moral weight to our understanding and appreciation of emotion in relation to what it means to be human. This account of emotion is therefore strongly teleological in emphasis and owes a debt to virtue ethics in its conclusion that emotions are above all *eudaimonistic*: that is, they are conducive to human flourishing and the pursuit of biological, psychological and social goods. Our evaluation of whether emotions are constructive or destructive requires, therefore, a 'thick description' of what those goods constitute: 'care, nonviolence, justice, mutuality' (p. 186).

McClure's starting-point lies with the ubiquity and imprecision of emotion in contemporary culture. From her own perspective as a pastoral theologian, she is aware of the significance of emotion – and the lack of it – for our very survival and development as human beings. Yet any exploration beyond this simple fact soon becomes bewilderingly complex and diffuse. For many, Western culture has become *too* emotional: individualistic, febrile, unthinking and narcissistic. The rise of populism rests in part on an appeal to the emotions of resentment, readily incited by forms of social media and communication that militate against the non-

emotive virtues of reflection, circumspection, and reason. No wonder then, that we are confused and conflicted about the nature of emotion; and McClure embarks on an exploration that takes in six primary disciplinary traditions: philosophy, theology, evolutionary biology, psychology, cultural anthropology and neuroscience.

The first two chapters consider ancient Greek philosophy and early Christianity up to Augustine. While each tradition contains a diversity of understandings, an inescapable dominant theme emerges: passions and emotions are antithetical to human flourishing, either in the threat they pose to the triumph of reason and will over desire, or because they represent occasions for sin. The practices of Christian life were a matter of overcoming one's baser nature – represented by the snares and delusions of emotion – in pursuit of the ultimate goal of union with God in Christ.

As Western Christendom waned, to be succeeded by a technical-rational scientific world-view, the connection of emotion to one's moral development was displaced by an altogether more functional understanding. If human beings were, essentially, no more than highly evolved animals, then qualities such as conscience, will and reason are inconsequential. Emotions have relevance only insofar as they serve the ends of evolutionary advantage. While some natural scientists such as Darwin considered the outward expression of emotion to be a tangible adaptive quality, discernible within the behaviour of many non-human animals, other behavioural scientists and psychologists discounted emotions on the grounds that only discernible behaviour, and not inward subjective states, provided sufficient grounds for study. As modern humanistic psychologies and therapies gained ground, however, practitioners returned to the conviction that emotions – as complex, diverse and multi-faceted -- held the key to much of human behaviour, for good and ill. Once more, then, the extent to which emotion was fundamental for survival, growth and well-being was acknowledged: put

at its most value-neutral, emotions were understood as ‘attempts by individuals to navigate their personal and social environments’ (p. 101).

McClure introduces a further important insight in her chapter on cultural anthropologies of emotion, namely that emotion and emotions are culturally conditioned. They have histories, are frequently gendered, and vary according to material and social environment. They are integral in facilitating many kinds of social and interpersonal bonding through activities such as ritual; and they are also susceptible to political manipulation. Emotions are socially constructed rather than fixed states waiting to be triggered in the brain by certain stimuli. For McClure, neuroscience provides the most plausible account of emotions that is capable of incorporating social, physical and psychological dimensions of experience. Contexts, circumstances and lived experience help to generate expressions of emotion, which are always already culturally freighted.

In order to do justice to this holistic model, therefore, McClure concludes that it is necessary to come full circle, and return to philosophical and theological perspectives, albeit informed by these other world-views. In attempting a synthesis, McClure is not suggesting that these can be separated or distilled from their various cultural origins, or that these principles somehow exist independently, as universal values. Rather, it is up to each culture to evaluate for itself what it identifies as its social, moral and religious ‘goods’ in relation to human life. Yet she would offer a strong steer in the direction of emotions that foster group solidarity and cohesion, empathy, co-operation, interpersonal bonding, learning and adaptability. The opposite of flourishing is loss of connection or social solidarity, resistance to change, lack of value-directed goals and actions, whereas emotions help to safeguard and communicate these values.

This book is exemplary in the way it sets out the challenges and potential of interdisciplinary study within pastoral and practical theology. McClure talks about each disciplinary paradigm as representing different pieces of a puzzle (p. xii) and accordingly her work is underpinned by an exhaustive body of literature. The bibliography is vast and the footnotes run to over 100 pages: a *tour de force* of scholarship and a research resource in its own right. Such total immersion in a specialist subject is a rare luxury in contemporary scholarship, but McClure's work serves as a benchmark for all those who believe that theology's engagement with human affairs must be attentive to the voices of the world as well as the Church.

Undoubtedly, this book cannot do more than clear the ground and set the agenda for subsequent work. But ultimately by placing the study of emotions within the framework of value and human purpose this book will invite further theological reflection that will be all the more rich for the nuances and details McClure's study offers.